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ABSTRACT

Without a clear idea of the continuity of literary traditions, one is apt to lose a firm grasp on the distinctive qualities of literacy and literate communities. Literary history teaches that writers arise out of literary traditions. In the United States in the last few decades, however, the act of writing has come to be seen as an act of totally individual creation. The writer's voice is apart from the social world rather than within it. With neither an unproblematic tradition to draw on nor a predisposition to search out literate continuity, composition theory has ignored the connection between what one reads and what one writes. Shared interests and communication in time may lead to a shared tradition of readings. The common readings facilitate common perspectives, issues, language, and understanding, so that new writing may contribute to an evolving corpus of statements that transcend the limits of ordinary social groups. Few documents are written for all times, places, and audiences. To understand the purposes, messages, and interactions of writing, students need to look to the social contexts out of which the writing arises and the social contexts toward which the writing is directed. Writing pedagogy may be seen as providing the students the means for entering into literate communities. The recent pedagogic interest in writing across the curriculum is clearly a movement to seat writing within identifiable social literate contexts. (HOD)

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Written Language Communities: Writing in the Context of Reading

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Written Language Communities: Writing in the Context of Reading

Literary history teaches that writers arise out of literary traditions. Most writers live comfortably within the limits of their contemporary traditions; hacks diminish the traditions; adventurous writers import ideas and techniques from other times and places; transcendent writers fulfill and transform the many traditions they work with. Only Caedmon, Orpheus, Moses, and their few peers are granted their words directly by a divine source. For the rest of us writing is a human activity, learned, practiced, and bettered within human societies. In other humans we find the ends as well as the origins of writing. Audiences may be as large as the middle-class readers of late nineteenth century popular magazines or as limited as Milton's "fit...though few," as immediate as Shakespeare's fellow Londoner's or as distant as Whitman's imaginings of generations of commuters who will cross at Brooklyn Ferry. Writers do not learn to shape statements in wordless vacuums, nor do they create statements except as part of human discourse.

What we know concerning eminent poets and novelists, we have in the past also known about the less exalted student writers who sit in composition classrooms. Until recently the teaching of writing unashamedly drew on some form of literary tradition to be imbibed through reading. Although in practice anthologies of readings remain as part of many composition courses, theory of the teaching of writing has, for reasons to be discussed below,

moved away from this apparent link between reading and writing. The rationale and specific uses of reading in writing courses are no longer self-evident. Without clear ideas about the continuity of literary traditions, we also lose firm grasp on the distinctive qualities of literacy and literate communities. While we cannot return to former understandings of literate traditions, which fell into disfavor with cause, a broader reformulation of literary continuity can take into account the factors earlier ideas explained along with more contemporary realizations. In this essay I will sketch the relationship of reading and writing in two literate traditions, suggest reasons for the dissolution of these coherent traditions, and then propose a new way of looking at the continuity of literacy which may serve as the basis for pedagogy.

In Renaissance England a student of writing would read the classic authors, transcribe the noblest phrases in commonplace books, and then imitate the forms and subjects of admired writers. Reading revealed a tradition which new writers strove to continue. In the flux of intellectual and social history the selection and language of admired writing changed: vernaculars gained respect; tastes changed with the spread of literacy; the Bible entered common reading; new social ideals arose when the tradition moved across the Atlantic; etc. Yet the sum of great writing, whatever it at any moment was considered to be composed of, always provided the dominating context for new writing. The tradition, providing the language of common humanistic discourse, was at times drawn from works of theology,

philosophy, history, politics, and imaginative literature. But in the last century on this side of the Atlantic, the canon has been reduced primarily to works of imaginative literature.

In Diaspora Judaism the relationship between reading and writing was even more tightly knit and stable than in the Anglo-American tradition. Torah and Talmud were the instruments through which one learned written language, and they remained the center of literate attention throughout life. These documents and the literature growing out of them provided the topics, problems, syntax, vocabulary, genres, and styles for all new writing. The separation of the languages of high literacy--Hebrew and Aramaic--from the languages of everyday life--Yiddish, Ladino, and the local vernaculars--insulated the tradition against influence from other contexts.

In both the Anglo-American and the Jewish cases, continuity of literary tradition encouraged the development of complex and subtle literacies. Exploration of the tools and subjects of written discourse built upon itself, so that the creation of new statements was never creation ex nihilo baffling an unprepared audience. Rather new statements were the creative transformation and extension of existing discourse, directed toward audiences already attuned to existing traditions. Even departures from tradition defined themselves against the common ground.

In the United States in the last few decades, however, the act of writing has come to be seen as an act of totally individual creation. The writer's voice is apart from the

social world rather than within it. Good historical and social reasons do lie behind the diminishing belief in a canon that informs both writer and audience. The narrowing of the canon to self-consciously literary documents occurred simultaneously with the rise of other modes of discourse--scientific writing, scholarly prose, mass journalism, and finally electronic media--to carry the important messages of our society. The narrowed canon represented an increasingly specialized world, marginal to most discourse. Further cultural pluralism began offering many new candidates for inclusion in the purely literary canon just as cultural relativism was shaking the faiths the lay behind the criteria for selecting canonical works. There is merit in asking ourselves why a particular nineteenth century English novel is more worth our attention than a tenth century Japanese narrative, just as there is merit in developing tastes and standards that rise above simple cultural similarity. The price of that increasing cosmopolitanism is greater confusion over what is part of, or what belongs in, the canon of admired writing which all literate people need to know.

Not only has the tradition of literate discourse as defined by English departments, the same departments that teach writing, seemed less than fully relevant to society's business and less than stable, composition theory has in recent years taken its lead from two disciplines that lead attention away from the continuity of literate traditions. Linguistics, basing its study primarily on unschooled natural forms of spoken language, has focussed attention on individual processes of statement making, with emphasis on the most basic skills of language. Consequently,

the social influences noticed by linguists are the local ones of spoken language communities rather than the more distant written influences, which skilled language users only become acquainted with in later childhood and adulthood. The importance of the distinction between immediate spoken language communities and more distant written language communities will be discussed below.

Attention on individual statement-making processes has lead composition theory to turn toward psychology, in both the scientific forms of cognitive psychology and theories of creativity and the non-scientific forms of philosophies of mental discipline. The psychological approaches to writing, which look into the well of the self as the source of all statements, have told us much about individual mental operations, but have excluded study of the social and cultural contexts in which the writing takes place. Links between what an individual comes to know about literate discourse through reading and what the individual then writes seem to have become invisible. Although cognitive psychology, for one, has shown interests in both reading and writing, the two skills are studied separately, rather than as parts of a continuous process of literate growth and practice.

With neither an unproblematic tradition to draw on nor a predisposition to search out literate continuity, composition theory has in recent years ignored the connection between what one reads and what one writes. Nonetheless an intuitive sense that such a connection exists has lead to repeated, but vague, statements of faith, calls for rationales, and the unabated use

of reading anthologies in writing courses. To search for the true grounds of that connection we must look beyond particular traditions, now in transition, and beyond the limiting perspectives of individual process. The following description of the structural relationship between any writer and the surrounding community of literacy will reach toward what is essential in reading for any writer. I will be formulating a theory of how writing is embedded in reading, such that writing without reading would be truly unimaginable. The following analysis will rely on the conceptual vocabulary of sociology, for the discipline of sociology studies how the behavior of others forms the context for and influences the behavior of individuals; written statements are forms of human behavior--highly elaborate, reflective, and enduring forms of human behavior.

Description of the social context of writing begins with the observation that each piece of writing is directed towards an audience; moreover, each written statement is a social act with respect to that audience. The writer is trying to do something to, for, or with that group of people brought together as audience; that something may be rousing to action, entertaining, showing solidarity, reinforcing opinion, demonstrating competence, exhibiting sensibility, sharing perceptions, unburdening one's spirit, adding to the common stock of knowledge, or any other act that can be performed through language.

No matter what social purpose the writer embodies in the text, however, how the audience interprets and reacts to the piece of writing actually determines what the social consequences of the writing are. How the audience receives each piece of

writing depends on the history, structure, and existing beliefs of the audience community. The familiarity of the ideas and form of expression, the reception of similar ideas in the past, the criteria of judgement, the existing shared knowledge, and the perceived interests of the community all help shape audience response. Freud's early writings, for example, met resistance from the psychological community for many reasons: his conclusions went against the accepted beliefs and accumulated knowledge of the time; his views, therefore, were perceived as opposed to the vested interests of the psychological establishment; further, he based his argument on evidence not then considered reliable, the testimony of the mentally troubled; most importantly Freud's concerns violated central taboos of his society.[1] To both the professional and popular audience, Freud's methods and claims most resembled those of tribal witchdoctors, and so his audiences evaluated his work. Only when social mores, common wisdom and criteria of psychological judgement changed--in large part due to his own work, was Freud's distinctive contribution generally recognized. That his ideas became, as Auden noted, a "climate of opinion"[2] not only indicates the power of statements to remold society, but also reports the necessary condition for the social acceptance of any claims as heterodox as Freud's. The radical new work has to change habits of reading and judgement so that the audience can read the new work in an appreciative way.

How the community perceives the role of writer in general and each writer in particular will further condition reception.

Whether the poet is stereotyped as vatic or effete, as . . . spokesman for the universal heart or recorder of idiosyncratic sensibility, as word-crafter or self-singer, affects how the poem will be read. A writer's particular reputation will further set the terms for the reading, as the myth of Sylvia Plath has conditioned both the popularity and the interpretation of her works. Freud's disrepute even before he began to explore free association, dreams, and sexualtiy, set the stage for the rejection of his major work.[3]

A skilled writer can attempt to take the state of the audience and the audience's perception of himself into account in order to make an effective statement within the community. An attorney preparing a written brief can manipulate persona and argument depending on whether the case is to be considered by a federal regulatory agency, a small town jury, or the Supreme Court. Classical rhetoric teaches some of the arts of manipulation of audience response and perception, but to the general arts of persuasion through pathos and ethos the writer must add particular knowledge of the audience, a knowledge gained by observation, experience, and participation within the community. That intimate knowledge of the literate community is often gained across the written page, as the philosopher comes to understand current philosophic issues and modes of reasoning by reading the work of contemporaries, as the lawyer learns by reading judicial opinions what arguments are likely to work under what conditions, or as the poet discovers through reading reviews how his work is being read. As these last examples suggest, a writer can use knowledge of the audience and the audience's

perception of the writer for much more than controlling ethos and pathos; the writer needs social knowledge to understand the particular communicative task of each piece of writing. For example, the grade school child reads the rules, suggestions, and sample answers in textbooks, then compares these ideals with the work of classmates, and finally receives the teacher's grade on his or her own efforts; that child is learning to make complex social judgements about the academic society which he or she must by law participate in, even if only as a mute resistor.

Even prior to forming the site for the writing's purpose and reception, the social context has helped shape the writer's consciousness and even sense of self.[4] The writer's social history will influence perception of reality, knowledge accepted as given, the designation of situations considered appropriate for written comment, the topics and approaches of interest, the writer's stance and purposes with respect to the audience, and the linguistic and rhetorical tools at the writer's disposal. This last, the common language, defines vocabulary and syntax, but also limits of propriety, genres, organizations of statements, favored styles and modes of development. The available repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical tools conditions the kinds of statements one can make.

If one's entire experience is entirely within a single, coherent social world, one's writing will likely resemble in form, content, and purpose prior writing arising from similar circumstances, and one can anticipate that the familiar statement will be appropriate, satisfying the conditions of the occasion. Seventeenth century American Puritan sermons bear a marked resemblence

to each other, and each served its purpose in its time.

Every writer has, of course, other resources beyond the shaping influences of society. One may observe and manipulate nature directly; Vesalius's dissections allowed him to correct Galen's anatomy. One may consult ones own imagination and sentiments; the muse berates Sir Phillip Sidney in the guise of Astrophel, "Fool...look in they heart and write." We are not surprised, as further example, that even in the most sexually repressive societies, sexuality keeps being rediscovered as a subject of writing. Finally, the writer may come to know, and even participate in, other social groups, whether across class, religious, ethnic, or geographical boundaries; Conrad's travels affected his writing. The contact with other societies may be through reading; the politically active student who discovers the political thinking of other times and places will begin to make different kinds of statements.

Insofar as these new resources move the writer, however, they place the writer in a dilemma, for they lead the writer to make statements unfamiliar, if not unacceptable, to the audience. The writer must then choose among forgetting the novel elements, accepting some degree of alienation, or attempting to communicate the novelties through manipulation and controlled expansion of the existing common language of the audience community. That political high school student can try to exclude the influence of reading Greek political thought from any political statement, can risk being called elitist or fascist, or can try to introduce the novel elements through bending the political language and concepts of the high school peers. The last option is, of course,

the one that has the most to do with communication; it is the means of growth for language and knowledge. Vesalius, even while rejecting Galen's anatomy, used much of the vocabulary and structure of Galen's work; for both author and audience the new had to be cast within the framework of the familiar.[5] Even Astrophel communicates his heart-felt vision through the conventional sonnet sequence. The sixteenth-century explorers were hard-pressed to describe the landscape of the New World because they had only the landscape vocabulary developed for European scenes; it took time to forge a vocabulary adequate for the new scenes.[6]

I am not here suggesting that all societies have only a narrow range of admissible ritual statements, but rather in any social group at any moment there are limits to what shared language allows to be communicated and shared beliefs allow as admissible. Even social groups that value cosmopolitanism highly have comprehension problems;.. they become more cosmopolitan through gradual expansion of linguistic means and recognized content.

Written language offers special opportunities for the introduction of novel elements. The privacy, quiet, and extended time that writing allows for observation, reflection and carefully prepared statement make more likely the creation of deep originalities, while the potentially extended and complex structures offered by writing make possible more complete and precise exposition of new ideas and observations. The reader also has sufficient time to consider and assimilate novelties of language

and idea. But most importantly reading makes possible the extensive importation of foreign statements. The reader can interact with and later draw on in new writing the perspectives of cultures and social groups well beyond the range of acquaintance or travel. This cosmopolitan knowledge includes linguistic possibilities as well as content and perspectives. Reading the literature of another social group, even of one's own language and geographic region, suggests new genres, new words, new types of statements. Consider the effect on the linguistic imagination if one supplements reading of the Daily News with reading of the New York Times, or vice-versa.

Just as writing offers broader resources of language and content than speech, writing also offers possibilities of audiences that go beyond the hearing range of one's voice. The audience can become both larger and more varied. The primary characteristic of literary audiences is shared interest rather than social similarity and proximity in time and space. Communities at a distance may be formed, the written word being the primary form of interaction. Shared interests and communication in time may lead to a shared tradition of readings. The common readings facilitate common perspectives, common issues, common language, and common understanding, so that new writing may contribute to an evolving corpus of statements that transcend the limits of ordinary social groups. For example, the canons of classical readings in many academic disciplines, canons which form the basis for graduate education, foster coherence in geographically dispersed disciplines by making familiarity with the literature a requirement for entering into the professional community.

Writing does have a place in daily social life--the sales clerk records a transaction and writes a receipt, or you leave a note when you don't find someone at home. But writing has a potential for becoming increasingly removed from the immediacies of face-to—face interaction. In a reflective, semi-private state the writer may continue a special kind of social interaction that occurs over the written page. The sales record enters the ledger books and becomes the stuff of accountants, IRS agents, and finally economic historians. As the personal note becomes extended it may draw on traditions of letter-writing, autobiography, and confession; as that change takes place the purpose and audience switch. Historically, the bookish person has repeatedly been accused of being unworldly--that is, having a minimal relationship with the immediate community. For the bookish person, the stronger relationships develop with more distant communities of discourse. Indeed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century a number of European intellectuals claimed allegiance to the Republic of Letters rather than their own nations.[7]

In our eclectic age libraries are stocked with documents reflecting many communities of discourse, both historical and contemporary. We can eavesdrop on and participate in many written conversations. But the superficial topic formulations of our index systems and the massiveness of the variety of material available obscure the webs of discourse that draw books together. Only where disciplines have become self-identified loci of literature, letting students know what works must be mastered and establishing criteria for admitting new contributions does the cumulative progress of a conversation take unmistakeable shape.

Few documents are written for all times, all places, and all audiences; what comes to mind are the plates attached to the Voyager and Pioneer spacecrafts. Most writing that survives beyond its place in communal discourse, to be spied on by outsiders, becomes only the artifact of a foreign culture: a letter indicating attitudes of ante-bellum plantation owners or an article revealing the curious ways of Soviet genetics. Those documents that rise above their original communities to speak to us directly, as do Shakespearean sonnets and Platonic dialogues, speak more directly the more we know of their contexts--the issues, language ways of thinking and arguing, the literate community of the times.

Thus, though literacy offers possibilities of human interaction that are removed from second-by-second immediacy, literate interaction is not removed from the complexities of human society. To understand the purposes, messages, and interactions of writing we need to understand we need to look to the social contexts out of which the writing arises and the social contexts toward which the writing is Hirected. Such understanding is important for the discourse theorist, but it is of even more practical importance for the student who must interpret reading from and frame writing for many different literate contexts. Writing pedagogy may be seen providing the students means for entering into literate communities. Academic disciplines offer the most apparent written language communities which the student needs to learn to participate in. The recent pedagogic interest in Writing Across the Curriculum is clearly

a movement to seat writing within identifiable social literate contexts. As we come to understand the role of the literature and tradition of each discipline in shaping the writing of new contributions, we will come to understand more about the dynamics of less compact, less self-identified written language communities. We may even come to see that the link between reading and writing does not depend on a single imposed literary tradition; the link between reading and writing is a fact of all written discourse.

NOTES

[1]Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, ed. L. Trilling and S. Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1961), pp. 176-177.

[2]W.H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" in Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957 (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 168.

[3]Jones, p. 163.

[4]My thinking on this subject has been strongly influenced by George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); L.S. Vygotsky, Mind in Society (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) and Thought and Language (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1962); and A.R. Luria and F. Ia. Yudovich, Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971). Previous application of such social psychological ideas to the study of writing appeared in James Britton et. al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Educational, 1975) and James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

[5]Elizabeth Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), II, pp. 568-573.

[6]Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New World (New York: Viking Press, 1967), pp. 1-34.

[7]Eisenstein, I, pp. 136-158.